

update Reconciliation talks and ceasefire negotiations - 12 June

Key points:

- **Fatah and Hamas engage in renewed efforts to negotiate a deal**
- **President Abbas abandons precondition that Hamas cede control of Gaza before talks**
- **Israeli cabinet delay decision on military operations in Gaza to give Egypt more time to broker ceasefire deal**

Efforts to address the current situation in Gaza and the political stalemate between Fatah and Hamas have been stepped up. Negotiations over a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas continue under Egyptian mediation and Israel has recently agreed to delay taking a decision over military action in order to give more time to make progress in the talks. Alongside continuing ceasefire negotiations, Abbas has renewed efforts to reach a political deal with Hamas to end the longstanding political stalemate between the factions since the collapse of the National Unity Government.

Fatah-Hamas talks

Latest developments

- Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas called for a resumption of talks with Hamas on 4 June. Following Abbas' statement, representatives from Hamas and Fatah met in Dakar last weekend (7-8 June) in an attempt to restart negotiations between the warring factions.
- This breakthrough comes after a year of political deadlock following the collapse of the National Unity government and Hamas' subsequent violent takeover of Gaza in June 2007.
- Palestinian President Abbas opened the possibility for restarting negotiations between the factions when he called for unconditional talks with Hamas last week (4 June). Until then he had refused to talk to Hamas unless it relinquished control of Gaza.
- Hamas and Fatah officials met for two days of talks (7-8 June) in Dakar, Senegal, hosted by Senegalese President Abdoulaye Wade (currently head of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference). Wade said the talks were aimed at rebuilding an atmosphere of "trust and mutual respect". Following on from the Senegal talks, Abbas visited Saudi Arabia and Egypt to enlist the support of Prince Abdullah and President Mubarak in reconciliation efforts.
- The recent talks in Senegal follow of a number of failed attempts to broker a deal. In March 2008 the two parties met in Yemen to try and restore a Palestinian Unity Government but talks faltered around Hamas' refusal to give up control of the Gaza strip.

Ceasefire negotiations

Latest developments

- Israel's security cabinet met on Wednesday (11 June) to discuss the worsening security threat from Gaza and the increased rocket attacks in recent weeks which have resulted in the death of three Israelis since May. At the meeting it was agreed that Israel would give the Egyptian's more time to broker a ceasefire. At the same time Israel is continuing with preparations for a possible large scale operation in Gaza should the ceasefire negotiations fail.
- In a sign that ceasefire negotiations between Hamas and Israel may be progressing, a letter written by kidnapped IDF soldier Gilad Shalit was transferred to his parents by Hamas on 8 June via the Carter Center in Ramallah.

Background

- Hamas seized control of the Gaza Strip in June 2007. Since then over 1400 rockets and 1700 mortars have been fired from Gaza into southern Israel killing and wounding Israeli civilians. In efforts to prevent these attacks, the IDF has responded with air and ground incursions into Gaza which have resulted in militant and civilian casualties.
- Israel has also imposed restrictions on the supply of fuel into Gaza since October 2007 when it declared it "hostile territory" in response to the increasing number of rocket and mortar attacks.
- Palestinian militants have recently used Iranian-produced long range Katyusha rockets, which place the Israeli cities of Ashkelon and Netivot within range of rocket fire. The southern city of Sderot is a primary target, drawing around 35% of the total rocket attacks from Gaza.
- Egyptian President Mubarak has recently been attempting to broker a ceasefire deal between Israel and Hamas to try and ease the humanitarian and economic situation in Gaza.
- Egypt has a significant role to play in any future ceasefire as Israel has repeatedly demanded that it do more to stop the smuggling of arms across its border into Gaza. Egypt's border with Gaza at Rafah has also been the focus of much attention in recent months when Palestinian protestors stormed the crossing in January which had been shut since Hamas took over Gaza last year.
- The current Egyptian initiative is being led by Egyptian Intelligence Chief, Omar Suleiman. Following his last visit to Israel on 12 May he said he had "high expectations" that a ceasefire deal could be reached.
- Negotiations have so far stalled primarily because of Israeli fears that Hamas would use the lull in violence as an opportunity to rearm and regroup. Israel demands that any ceasefire deal should involve a cessation of all arms smuggling across the border from Egypt but Hamas have so far refused to accept this condition.
- Another factor being considered in the current round of talks is the release of captured Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit. Shalit has been held in Gaza since he was seized by Hamas militants while patrolling the Gaza border in June 2006. Hamas' transfer of a letter from the kidnapped Israeli soldier on 9 June could signal a new Hamas willingness to include his release in any future deal.